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On Having Good Intentions

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AND what do you think the author is really trying to say here?

The class is silent, miserable, hunting, hunting amongst the lines, in the words, for the key to this secret.

This time it is a painting.

And what do you think the artist is really trying to say here? . . .

Again the hunting . . . hunting . . .

And what do you think the choreographer, the composer, the director, the poet . . .

The difficulty in answering this question doesn't only belong with the students. The teacher, in undertaking this unpacking of culture can also be faced with a dreaded uncertainty.

The trick, of course, (for both teacher and student) for dealing with the awful silence that accompanies the question lies in waiting until someone else finally caves in and supplies an answer. Or in reciting some learned person's treatise on the artist. Or in inviting the artist themselves to talk about their work. Or, as a last desperate measure, in guessing.

If this continues to be the central means by which we are taught to approach the arts it is no wonder we, in this country, find ourselves uncomfortable with any art other than spectacle or entertainment. (With spectacle we know beforehand that the artist wants to impress us visually, with entertainment we know they want to please us).

Given the human tendency to move towards pleasure and away from discomfort, given the inadequacy associated with guesswork and the fear of embarrassment, it is entirely understandable that most Australians have little to do with any art other than spectacle or entertainment.

She was seven and new at the school. There was a painting class. The teacher, a young man, was talking about how he wanted them all to outline all the figures and the border of the painting with black. They painted diligently. Then they all had to line up to show him their work. She, in turn, placed her painting on the desk and he was immediately angry. "You haven't outlined the figures with black." "But I don't see any black outline around people" she said. "That's not the point" he replied. "It looks better." He showed her someone else's work that looked better.

She was thirteen and new at the school. The art teacher had already given the topic to be painted. It was "The Circus". She felt fine about painting this . . . in the previous town she had lived over the road from a big spare block where circuses had always pitched their tents when they came to town. So she knew about circuses. It was strange though. Everyone in the room was painting circus tents that were small and clean and striped red and yellow with scalloped edges. But the circus tents she knew were huge and dark brown and dirty.

This is what she proceeded to paint. A huge, dark brown circus tent that took up most of the sheet of paper. And in the corner she carefully placed a brown elephant.

Of course there was trouble. An obvious smartarse and on her first day in the school.

At school she discovered art was about getting it right. And she wasn't succeeding.

She gave up the idea of being an artist.

She decided to be an anthropologist. She imagined herself travelling alone to some Pacific Island or New Guinea spending long periods of time with the indigenous people there, learning their customs, their language . . .

She realised that, whenever she thought about it though, she fantasised herself having been there a long time, comfortable, known. And she began to wonder how someone might BEGIN to live in a world without any familiar reference points, not as a tourist, but in order to communicate, to take part, to carry out research. How might she know what to see? Or what was important but hidden . . . ?

And then she discovered that anthropological frameworks had been developed for seeing/experiencing new worlds. Indeed, the framework she would need to choose (Functionalist or Structuralist for instance) would not only determine how she experienced the culture - but also how popular her writing would be. (In the early 70's for instance Functionalism was OUT!) But it was clear that some framework was necessary to even begin to know how to see.

She thus realised that frameworks were always there even in the way she looked at her own society or, indeed, herself.

And while they enabled the world to be seen more clearly they also simultaneously set limitations on what could be seen, determined that other aspects remained hidden.

We were driving to the beach, listening to the cricket commentary on the car radio. One of the passengers was American. He was silent, polite for a long time. Suddenly he could bear it no longer.

"Where on earth is Silly-Mid-On? "

I was driving, everyone else was asleep.. "Well . . . ," I began, having never had to think this through before . . . "everyone just knows where Silly-Mid-On is . . . You see, there's an On side and an Off side. The On side being the side of the ground the bat is turned to, and therefore the side to which the ball will most naturally be hit. The Off side is the other one. Mid-On is half-way between the two wickets on the On side and Silly-Mid-On is so close to the bat you would have to be silly to stand there."

"Okay," he said, "what about Slips."

Undaunted and supported by my logic to date I continued . . . "Slips are on the Off-side just behind the bat where the ball might be tipped or slip if the bat touched it but didn't stop it. It follows that you have fieldsmen or women in slips when there are faster bowlers." (I was now making this up but it seemed reasonable.)

"And what's this got to do with art?" I hear you ask (even if you are not American).

With sport, like cricket, there is a simple pleasure in the competition between individuals and groups. The pleasure of the game. I grew up amongst cricket players. As a result, it all seems very natural. I just wonder how long it would take someone who had no previous knowledge of the game to understand it without outside explanation. And at what stage, in this developing understanding, the pleasure would become available to them. The American was like an anthropologist looking in. But then, so also an Australian unfamiliar with the game and its language.

Should cricketers be more responsible for explaining the game or changing the rules so that others can understand?

It could be argued that aspects of cricket were certainly changed and popularized with the introduction of the one day game but for the most part the cricketers themselves weren't told to do other than work on their game.

No one ever asked of cricket . . . "But what is the bowler really trying to say here?"

No one ever asked of the Trobriand Islanders . . . "But what is your culture really trying to say?"

The question is ridiculous. They are engaged in living. They are engaged in experiences of pleasure and commitment.

With the art of every culture too, there are those who know the language/the rules (or conventions) and there are those who don't. As in most areas of social life, to the group inside, the conventions are so known they seem natural . . . how things are - to those outside there are clearly conventions at play but the language is foreign. It's hard to find a structure for understanding.

But, as with the cricket team, or the Trobriand Islanders:

"And what is the artist really trying to say?" is the wrong question.

It's the wrong question to ask about art and it's the wrong question to ask of the artist.

The experience of the work is the work. And that experience is to be found within the person looking at the work.

The question to be asked instead is *"What do I see and feel?"*

And then *"And what are the structures of this society that determine both how I perceive this work and how the artist has made it?"*

And then *"And what are the words I need in order to better understand this experience?"*

To date, as a culture, we have been badly taught.